

# Decolonial Subversions

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Plan S and the ‘opening up’  
of scientific knowledge: A  
critical commentary

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## Abstract

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Plan S is an initiative that aims at ‘opening up’ access to scientific knowledge by ensuring immediate and cost-free (for the reader) access to scientific knowledge under specified Open Access (OA) principles. While the initiative is guided by evidently good intentions to overcome current obstacles that restrict the quick publication, dissemination and reproduction of scientific research, it is not only informed primarily by a natural sciences perspective, neglecting the humanities and social sciences, but also it does not appear to consider or address the more profound structural inequalities in knowledge production across the world. The essay aims to problematise some of these less often pronounced asymmetries in an effort to shift the attention of OA advocates to more urgent issues and to evidence the necessity for more subversive remedial strategies.

Keywords: Plan S, Open Access Publishing, global knowledge production, Euro-American epistemology, economic inequalities, research funding, English

Plan S was introduced in 2018 as an initiative that aims at opening up access to scientific knowledge by ensuring immediate and paywall-free access to scientific knowledge under Open Access (OA) principles as defined by cOAlition S (<https://www.coalition-s.org/>). While we discern the good intentions behind this initiative and we reaffirm the need for making research more accessible, we find that insufficient consideration has been given to the deeper epistemological underpinnings of knowledge production and structural inequalities in global research, which improvements in knowledge dissemination and accessibility alone cannot resolve. Márton Demeter and I (Romina Istratii) have joined forces to produce a critical commentary that aims to problematise some of these less often pronounced issues in regard to Plan S, hoping that this can inform current discussions in some positive way. I write from the intersectional positionality of an Eastern European decolonial researcher with many years' experience in African development research, an active member of the Decolonising SOAS Working Group, and having previously acted as co-Editor of the open access *SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research* and as Research Funding Officer in the Research Office of SOAS University of London. Márton writes from the position of an Eastern European researcher who has worked extensively on the topic of unjust hegemonies in global knowledge production and the unbalanced process of academic capital accumulation. He is also the founder and co-editor of *KOME: An International Journal of Pure Communication Inquiry* that is a diamond open access academic journal in the field of communication studies. While I have previously drawn attention to the limited ability of OA publishing to decentre effectively the current epistemology,<sup>1</sup> Márton has been a vocal critic of the OA movements for overstating the significance of free access, while uncritically neglecting the role of knowledge hegemonies in the global publishing industry and beyond.<sup>2</sup>

Our perusal of the scholarly community's responses to Plan S suggests two types of narratives around it. The first narrative relates to business model issues and the financial aspects of research dissemination, recognising that publishing has become increasingly costly under the aggressive business politics of established publishers, while researchers and academic institutions have seen fewer changes in accessibility to research (e.g. Haug, 2019; Brainard, 2019). This combines with a narrative that emphasises the ethical urgency for universalising scientific knowledge and ensuring that this can be accessed immediately by readers and researchers to be critiqued, reproduced and put to the test (Open Letter in Support of Funder Open Publishing Mandates; European Commission Statement, 2018).<sup>3</sup> Proponents of Plan S seem to believe that a shift to a model whereby funders gradually compel

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<sup>1</sup> Romina Istratii and Helen Porter, "Understanding the Possibilities and Limitations of Open Access Publishing for Decolonising Knowledge-Making and Dissemination," *The SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research* 11 (n.d.): pp. 185-194)

<sup>2</sup> Marton Demeter, "The Winner Takes It All: International Inequality in Communication and Media Studies Today," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 96, no. 1 (2018): pp. 37-59);

Marton Demeter, "Open Access Movements: Emancipation or Hypocrisy," *KOME: An International Journal of Pure Communication Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (2019))

<sup>3</sup> European Commission Statement, Accessed May 17, 2019, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2014-2019/moedas/announcements/plan-s-and-coalition-s-accelerating-transition-full-and-immediate-open-access-scientific\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2014-2019/moedas/announcements/plan-s-and-coalition-s-accelerating-transition-full-and-immediate-open-access-scientific_en);

Open Letter in Support of Funder Open Publishing Mandates Michael Eisen, accessed May 7, 2019, <http://michaieleisen.org/petition/index.php>)

researchers to publish their research under paywall-free OA standards, while simultaneously guaranteeing researchers' copyright through common licence agreements specified by Plan S, could be a step in the right direction (Van Noorden, 2018).<sup>4</sup>

This diptych argumentation may sound convincing, but we find that the overall initiative rather takes attention away from more urgent structural and epistemological hierarchies that have historically characterised the world of knowledge production,<sup>5</sup> which we understand as being interlinked with issues of knowledge dissemination, but not being limited to those. We feel that trying to develop a new business model for publishing scientific research in a more timely fashion is not only euphemistically Open Access publication (clearly many OA journals, and especially high-impact and established periodicals, are conditioned on authors paying high article processing fees or APCs), but also does not address - and may unintentionally enforce - the continuing dominance of research produced in the Global North and the mainstream western epistemology, which has historically favoured its own language and standards of research production and evaluation, marginalising knowledge emerging from the Global South. For the purposes of this essay, we define the Global South/North division solely on the basis of scientometric indicators in the humanities and social sciences<sup>6</sup>. 'Global North' incorporates the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, the UK, Western Europe, Israel and some Asian countries (Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan). 'Global South' includes Latin America (including South and Central America), Eastern Europe, Asia (except those societies mentioned), the Middle East, Africa and parts of Oceania (except Australia and New Zealand).

In order to evidence why we think that Plan S is misguided and can be potentially pernicious in this way, it is useful to look in more detail at the principles that guide it. The platform states that Plan S will "support initiatives that establish robust quality criteria for Open Access publishing, such as the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) and the Directory of Open Access Books (DOAB)." A closer look at the journals currently listed under DOAJ (<https://doaj.org/>) and their profiles evidences that many have been started or operated by researchers in the Global South and that not all charge APCs, or charge processing fees that are considerably lower than those typically charged by Euro-American periodicals. Many of these journals do not publish with regularity, which is inevitably connected to their limited or lack of resources. Such characteristics can inevitably curtail their publication potential, making established and stable journals appear more appealing to prospective authors, especially if the authors can cover higher APCs. In view of current asymmetries whereby Euro-American periodicals lead the way in scientific publications and high-impact journals are given more prestige and are associated with career-related benefits for researchers,<sup>7</sup> it can be anticipated that where authors have the option and can cover the costs with the support of generous funders, they will prefer high-impact established journals. The Plan S manifesto affirms that authors are not restricted from publishing in journals of their

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Van Noorden, "Researchers Sign Petition Backing Plans to End Paywalls," *Nature News* 4, accessed May 7, 2019, [https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-07632-2?utm\\_source=briefing](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-07632-2?utm_source=briefing)

<sup>5</sup> Budd L Hall and Rajesh Tandon, "Decolonization of Knowledge, Epistemicide, Participatory Research and Higher Education," *Research for All* 1, no. 1 (2017): pp. 6-19

<sup>6</sup> Demeter, "The Winner Takes it All."

<sup>7</sup> Demeter, "Open Access Movements," 127.

own preference, provided that they also immediately share the research through OA institutional repositories. However, this seems to implicitly assume that repositories are globally accessible and used, which is not entirely the case, especially institutional repositories located in poorer societies that may lack research funds to maintain these online databases and to ensure accessibility to them (e.g. good connectivity and computers/mobile devices for accessing the internet).

More importantly, the majority of high-impact journals have been historically located in the English-speaking world, written for and targeting specialised English-speaking audiences. Smaller and peripheral journals, especially those published in non-European languages that lack a standard OA model or seemingly comply with Plan S OA requirements but do not have the necessary rigour are anticipated to receive less attention under this scheme. This can have important negative implications for scholars working outside of Euro-America and humanities and social sciences researchers, who often feel compelled to share their research in other languages or through local platforms of dissemination to make their research accessible to relevant communities and impactful locally. Conversely, it can disadvantage journals established at the local level that choose to publish in English in order to impact on mainstream paradigms and engage leading researchers in the fields. I (Romina) have previously published in a peer-reviewed diamond journal established by an academic institution in India. While the journal operates free of cost, attracting many researchers from the Global South, it also publishes in English, presumably because English is used within academic institutions in India and to facilitate a better engagement with and higher impact on the English-speaking academia. Since English is not always and necessarily the first language of the journal's international contributors, the language is perhaps not as polished as typically found in Anglo-American periodicals. In our experience, it is highly unlikely that such journals will be promoted and encouraged through Plan S, which still abides by peer review and quality standards prioritised in the dominant western epistemological system, a system conditioned –*inter alia*– on the authors' masterful manoeuvring of the English language.

However, it is precisely such types of journals that can enable trans-national exchanges and critical debates in knowledge production more effectively, by providing researchers outside of Euro-America with more accessible and affordable platforms to publish their research, but also a conduit to feed into the English-speaking academia. While Global South researchers can and do often publish in high-impact Anglo-American periodicals, the majority of Global South researchers have an undeniably disadvantaged position *vis-à-vis* international periodicals, most of which charge very high APCs that deem them unaffordable to most. Plan S is generally silent on these economic inequalities and the implications that these have for the distribution of knowledge production and publishing in these societies. It is demonstrably harder for a scholar, for example, located at an institution in Africa or Eastern Europe to publish their research than, for example, a scholar from an established North American or Western European university. In a previously published paper, Márton systematically analysed the geographic distribution of authors in leading periodicals, finding significant inequalities between Global South and Global North authors in terms of research visibility in the humanities and social sciences, as well as the natural sciences.<sup>8</sup> While his research was premised on analytics from the Web of Science, which has its own limitations, it is notable

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<sup>8</sup> Demeter, "Winner Takes It All."

that between the years 1975 to 2017, the number of Global South academics succeeding in publishing in core periodicals varied from 1 to 10 percent, with researchers in the Global North contributing up to 85 percent of world knowledge production.<sup>9</sup> It can be assumed that if authors outside of Euro-America could publish free of cost and if they were not constrained by normative requirements regarding language polishing and presentation (while many authors may speak and write in English within their indigenous contexts, the standards that most journals have are clearly attuned to a jargon that not everyone is expected to speak outside of the mainstream epistemology), their level of publications would increase manifold (see e.g. the anecdotal evidence in Canagarajah, 2002). Under the Plan S compliant OA publishing models that charges researchers high (and possibly increasingly higher) APCs, this imbalance in the distribution of knowledge production is anticipated to be preserved and likely enlarged. It is of little consequence that Plan S participating journals are asked to charge lower APCs for authors from low and middle-income countries since even a few hundred euros, pounds or dollars can still be prohibitive to most researchers residing in low and middle-income societies.

In fact, the demarcation between low, middle and high-income societies is itself problematic. There is no doubt that there are economically advantaged groups within poorer societies, just as there are very poor researchers in North America and Western Europe, which are increasingly multicultural regions and also attract many immigrant populations. Researchers who are, for example, children of first generation immigrants or are not permanent residents and have no established support systems in the host countries may need to be eligible for this fee-waiving service as others from middle or low-income countries. Similarly, one must consider regional differences in salaries and purchasing power, such as between Western and Eastern European countries. For example, in Hungary, assistant professors earn at most EUR 443 a month, and the monthly salary of associate professors might be under EUR 820. A EUR 1,500-2,000 publication fee under OA, which is a typical range in this industry, would be worth between three and six times the salary of an assistant professor. This makes it unlikely that Hungarian early-career researchers could realistically finance their publications, and it is unlikely (empirically speaking) that their institutions will incur these costs. Even if Hungary were to be considered a semi-developed country, and a lower fee were to be applied, a publication fee in the range of EUR 800-1,000 would still be above most assistant professors' capacity. The result would be that even the most hardworking and innovative researchers would face a stalemate, effecting a situation where only Western scholars are the knowledge producers and where more researchers outside of Euro-America are knowledge consumers and passive recipients and users of the centralised scientific knowledge.

It is vital to understand that interventions such as these cannot be evaluated outside of the broader matrix that governs research funding, which has been unequally available across regions and primarily conditioned on the standards and priorities (e.g. regarding eligibility or due diligence requirements) of Euro-American funders who dominate the landscape.<sup>10</sup> If

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<sup>9</sup> Demeter, "Winner Takes It All," 122.

<sup>10</sup> Romina Istratii, "Bridging the Epistemological, Structural and Normative in Knowledge Production: How Euro-centrism is Systemically Preserved and Can Be Subverted" In: LSE Africa Talks: Decolonising African Knowledge Systems, 16 January 2020, LSE, <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/32174/>



proper conditions are not put in place, the scheme risks enforcing new asymmetries in publication potential, giving advantage to some groups over other groups not on the premise of research excellence, but on material contingencies. It can be anticipated that researchers receiving funding from one of the state-owned agencies, national research councils or foundations which have joined/will join this plan will have a publication advantage compared to researchers who do not receive such funding or who receive funding from funders that do not cover OA publication costs, and who therefore lack the funds to release their work immediately and in high-impact journals (in our experience we have observed that high-impact journals tend to charge higher APCs, although this will need some research to be demonstrated). These include not only many researchers in the Global South, but also many humanities and social sciences scholars in Euro-American institutions who work with texts relying on their own funds and/or publish primarily monographs or book chapters, as opposed to journal papers.

Moreover, due to differences in the capacity of institutions in Euro-America and the Global South to support researchers with applications and the administration of funds, researchers in Euro-America would have a clear advantage. For instance, securing funding has been acknowledged as an important problem facing young African scientists, not only because of relatively fewer national sources of funding, but also due to lack of specialised support with highly bureaucratic or demanding international funding schemes.<sup>11</sup> Most higher education institutions in Africa would not have the research development capacity to support their researchers with preparing rigorous applications of the standards expected by Euro-American funders covering OA costs, provided that they are eligible to lead projects and administer such funds in the first place. Without the necessary structural changes in funding and research development capacity, the implementation of Plan S could heighten the current knowledge production gap between researchers in Euro-America and most other parts of the world. Similarly, independent researchers across the world lacking institutional support for preparing applications to prestigious funders covering OA costs, would be at a disadvantage compared to their employed university peers who can resort to institutional research offices. It must also be considered that many research offices in higher education institutions, such as in the UK, do not typically extend their support to PhD students, yet another parameter that can curtail early-career researchers' access to certain types of funding, potentially disadvantaging them in terms of OA publication possibilities. This could perpetuate existing hierarchies between senior/established academics and early-career researchers, which are widely affirmed as an inevitable reality of western academic institutions - precisely contradicting the objective of Plan S to support early-career researchers.

In addition to these business-model related issues, it is important to consider more structural issues of research publication that are again not directly addressed by Plan S. While Plan S commits to more transparent publication processes, it does not explain how the existing 'pathologies' of publication and peer review will be addressed in this process. It is important to recognise that many editorial boards, especially of established journals, have their own crystallised ideological directions within their disciplines, with some journals explicitly adopting epistemological paradigms that might not accommodate non-conventional

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<sup>11</sup> Catherine Beaudry, Johann Mouton, and Heidi Prozesky, *The Next Generation of Scientists in Africa* (South Africa: *African Minds*, 2018), p.88.

perspectives. This tendency can be linked to the easily corruptible peer review processes that are currently in place, which are not only intransparent, but can enforce the dominance of elite academics in their disciplines of specialisation. For example, it is not uncommon practice among reviewers to ask their works to be discussed and cited in the articles they anonymously provide feedback on. This forces the authors to cite works they might not necessarily agree with or wish to engage with, which may not only reinforce the dominance of western paradigms given the inequitable distribution of knowledge production as mentioned, but also reduces the ability of citation stats to reflect the actual influence and absorption of research by the scientific community. This only adds to the many other limitations of citation metrics, not least being their myopic understanding of impact that is out of touch with most humanities and social sciences research and their failure to capture effectively monograph citations, a frequent form of research production/dissemination in these disciplines.

Finally, it is important to underscore the possibility that higher education institutions in richer countries supporting researchers with OA funds through institutional funding pools will be gradually incentivised to imitate the funders' priorities and will support publications in established journals that match the standards and expectations of the funders under Plan S (especially since universities are increasingly pressured for research excellence under standardised assessment frameworks, such as the Research Excellence Framework or REF). This could potentially discourage applications for OA publication in non-western, less mainstreamed or emerging journals, especially non-English periodicals, contributing again indirectly to the dominance of mainstream publishers in the Global North and, consequently, the marginalisation of non-western perspectives in the production and dissemination of scientific knowledge.

In short, we sympathise with Plan S advocates who find the current subscription-based knowledge dissemination models problematically exclusivist and inefficient, but we also believe that Plan S is misguided in some ways due to limited understanding of epistemological issues in global knowledge production and the humanities and social sciences publications scene. It is imperative to be reflexive of the epistemological hegemony of the Global North historically and of inequalities in publishing and to be proactive in thinking about how new technologies can reverse these more profound hierarchies or at least be deployed in such a manner that does not reinforce them in unintended ways. As it stands now, Plan S does not articulate how it will ensure the participation of non-mainstream, non-English or emerging journals and how it will promote not only the international dissemination of knowledge produced in the Global North, but also enable possibilities for international researchers from different contexts, and especially disadvantaged, poorer or non-English-speaking researchers to criticise knowledge produced in the western epistemology and English-dominated scholarship. We would rather redirect attention to the urgency of developing a more meritocratic, inclusive and less epistemologically biased model of research production and assessment, such as by encouraging the co-development of research and co-authorship between researchers from different regions of the world (perhaps in bi-lingual forms), reconsidering more fundamentally peer review processes that subvert conventional standards founded in the Global North, and diversifying ways in which we assess journal quality to ensure that there is more room for emerging, peripheral and non-English journals and supporting publishers, journals and publications in and from societies



of the Global South, whose contribution and value cannot be easily measured by standardised Euro-American metrics.

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